

‘School versus Skool’¹ Analysis of the English Independent School System

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Abstract

The following paper is an adjustment of the proceedings from the lecture ‘*Spotlight on the UK series—School versus Skool*’ held at the Foreign Language Study Centre, Nanzan Junior College, Nagoya, July 4, 2009.

Introduction

The myriad selection of words for school in the United Kingdom (UK) makes it not only confusing for English language learners, but also for the average Brit. Is it public, private or independent school, secondary modern, comprehensive or state school? Where does Grammar school fit in? Is boarding and day school part of public, private, or state schooling? Is it better to send children to primary or prep (preparatory) school? Moreover, would it make a difference? I’m sure you’re already confused. Let me begin by clarifying the main terminology.

Private school, in other words fee-paying education for children aged 11 to 18 years old, has been traditionally recognized as *public* school until now. Due to political correctness, and out of a need to shake off obsolete stereotypes, public school has made great efforts to re-categorize themselves as *independent* school. Of course, prep, boarding and day school belong to an independent education.

¹ Adaptation of title from Culture Shock Britain: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette. Terry Tan. See References.

On the other hand, a state education, supported by each county’s Local Education Authority (LEA), is recognized as comprehensive school or secondary modern. Grammar school and the 11+ is an extremely interesting institution that only a fraction of the British population had access to. One would imagine this was due to exam success; however, surprisingly this was not the only requirement. See Appendix 1, Figure 1 for the main differences between state and independent schools.

Terminology Confusion

The employment of the term *college*, in relation to public school further contributes to the confusion. For example, Nanzan Junior College may be misinterpreted as a public school in England and Wales. Incidentally, this would be the equivalent of senior high school in Japan. There are more than 2,200² public schools in the UK educating approximately 7% of the student population (Vaughan-Rees, Sweeney, and Cassidy, 2005). In particular, there is an especially large number surrounding Greater London, for example Hertfordshire (see Appendix 1, Figure 2). It is evident that many international students would find the easy access to London a merit.

Introduction to Public School Stereotype

I’m sure some of you possess collected images of public school life and stereotype associations attached to single-sex boarding schools. Images of a Harry Potter boarding school life are a good reflection of public school, to some degree. Bullying is part of the process of adaption to boarding school life. A senior in the form above you, in other words class, would be in charge. It is a part of everyday life. I think the Tandai (Nanzan Junior College) is quite tame in comparison to one certain gossip attached to

² From UK Independent Schools Directory. Prospects Services Ltd. 2010. See References.

Cheltenham Ladies' College³. Celebrity teenage pregnancies come to mind!

Many students live at school, and boarding school territory is divided into house divisions. Each house is managed by a housemaster, and each form has a prefect. The prefect is the most senior boy or girl, and freshmen are disciplined by them. In addition to this seniority role, prefects carry out other minor roles, such as monitoring the raucous meal line in school refectories. The prefect may send badly behaving pupils to the end of the line, for often no obvious reason than to satisfy the prefect's ego, or one's power driven psychological insecurities (Adler in May, 1969). Pranks and cruel jokes are administered, while housemasters turn a blind eye. Some freshmen are forced to eat toothpaste, but this is a very mild prank in comparison. One can only imagine which kinds of jokes and obligations the poor fags had to endure.

Regarding public school language, it can seem alien to the ignorant. In Britain a fag is colloquial for cigarette, however, in some circles it can be recognized as an obsolete term for homosexuals. Nonetheless, within the public school domain, a fag is connected to seniority, whom is the prefect's servant (O'Driscoll, 1995).

The Connection between Religion and the Prefect

In the 16th century, James I was King of Scotland. When England's Queen Elizabeth I died, no heir succeeded her; as a result, James I became King of England. England was a patriotic Anglican country, finally able to celebrate release from the chains of Catholic French Popery (N. B. offensive term). However, the ubiquitous religious conflict persisted, and rebel Catholic groups remained. Nevertheless, within these groups hope surged following the coronation of James I. Yet to the disgrace of rebel Catholics, James I publicly renounced Catholicism. As a result, one rebel group attempted

³The Cheltenham Ladies' College is located in Gloucestershire, South West England.

to murder the King on November 5th 1605. This rebel terrorist was Guy Fawkes.

Guy was a publicly educated school boy, whom came from a respectable family. It has later been discussed that Guy was the unlikely mastermind behind the terrorist plot, more probably the scapegoat used to ignite the gunpowder barrels. Perhaps there is a more profound question to ask, which lessons and values are prefects instilling? Initiation processes for freshmen is looking quite sinister. Incidentally, the local parish of St. Peter’s celebrate a ‘family fun fireworks night’ (Ferne, 2010: 3), while the rest of the UK typically celebrates bonfire night or the synonym Guy Fawkes’ night (O’Driscoll, 1995). Nonetheless, the headmaster from St. Peter’s School is a staunch defender of Guy Fawkes, he has been quoted as saying ‘we do not burn effigies of old boys’ (Ferne, 2010).

What is the Origin of Public School?

It has been said that the term public school was derived from two things. On the one hand, during the 19th century the new tradition of educating sons amongst their contemporaries. In other words, boys left the privacy of home tutoring to be educated in a public institution. On the other, it has been proposed that public school was created due to the supply and demand of fee-paying pupils (Wikipedia, 2010). At that time, social classes were distinctly polarized; nevertheless, providing fees could be honored, boys from all social classes were permitted to attend. This is a paradox since it is unlikely working or lower classes would have disposable income.

‘The Sons of Decay’d Gentlemen’⁴

Some of the oldest public schools, for example, King’s College, Canterbury

⁴ Quote from the Queen’s Scholarships at Westminster College, <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

c.600⁵; Warwick c.914; St. Albans School 948; Eton College 1440; Westminster 1179 and Winchester College 1382 were established for bright boys from ‘poor or disadvantaged backgrounds’ (Wikipedia, 2010: 4). Public school was originally founded as a charitable organization, which offered free admission to anyone that could paradoxically, pay. Inevitably, the charitable few admissions diminished, and the majority of pupils were coming from fee-paying upper classes. As a result, the founding public school institution lost its’ charitable tradition, and became a symbol for private education for the wealthy, that is now recognizable in contemporary society.

A Charitable Act

If we compare late 19th century opinion with the mediaeval one, we can see an interesting connection. The mediaeval centuries viewed the process of education as a charitable act, which was provided by state officials. In the 19th century, Britain was at the height of imperialistic, industrial success. As a consequence, government and influential observers made the assumption that under the care of churches and cathedrals, ‘education must somehow be taking care of itself’ (O’Driscoll, 1995: 130). In modern society, England and Wales incidentally were the last European country to introduce a state-wide national education system (O’Driscoll, 1995).

Signs of Authentic Public School

With the existence of over 2200 independent schools, it can be difficult to judge whether the institution is authentic. In particular when interested parties are considering school fees, the authenticity of the school is a

wiki/Independent_school_(UK) page 4. See References.

⁵ Circa 600 = approximately year 600.

significant factor. Within public school educating circles there is a relentless debate concerning the endorsement of public schools. A reliable sign is that the head teacher is a member of the Headmasters’/Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC). Another contemporary sign is whether the school belongs to the Butterfly Cricket Club. Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Marlborough, Oakham, Rugby, Westminster and Winchester are public schools that have the authentic seal of approval (Wikipedia, 2010).

School Motto

Public school traditionally focused on teaching classics and developing a young man’s muscular prowess. Education was focused on building a young man’s character and cultivating a cut-throat attitude, which was a requirement for public and military life. In order to nurture these characteristics, schools left much of the discipline to elders and prefects, who enthusiastically enforced the rules and spirit of the school’s motto. Interestingly, it is possible to observe a school’s personality, and to some degree rules and ethics from the school motto (see Appendix 1, Figure 2). Character building and development of a team spirit is often considered of equal importance to academic achievements.

The Housemaster

When boys ventured out into public during the 19th century, it was customary for a tutor to open up his house. Hence, the present day connection with the house system. The housemaster is responsible for the pupils in his house, such as Harris House. This house system reflects the importance of schooling as a community, which has penetrated some state schools, not only as houses, but also as sixth form. The sixth form is often a segregated community within the school grounds that is used as the period



Example of Sixth Form at State School ⁶

of study before entering university (O'Driscoll, 1995).

Charitable Tax Break

The majority of public schools rely heavily on private funding. Some independent schools, especially the traditional authentic schools have a charitable income status. As a result, they receive a 100 million pound tax relief from the government. In order to maintain their status public schools return 300 million pounds for the public (state) benefit, and in fact, support state schools with 2 billion pounds. Is it a paradox that public schools are supporting state schools? (Wikipedia, 2010).

Public School Language

I touched on a few terms briefly in the introduction; however, I will return to some background now. Much public school slang derives from Latin, since schools regarded the study of Latin an important part of the curriculum. It has been reported that Winchester College gives a dictionary to their pupils (Time. inc. 2010). You can begin to understand

⁶ Gordano School, North Somerset, England.

the exclusivity associated with a publicly educated person. Most of Britain’s senior judges, lawyers, politicians, royalty, and those who rule the country have been educated at a public school (O’Driscoll, 1995, Paxman, 1998). As customary with old boys and girls, the special language once shared at school connects the alma mater across an infinite network. Entry to the group is difficult if not impossible for the uninitiated! (See Appendix 2, Figure 3).

Tension Always Exists between...

Not only is the new boy or youngest sibling a fag, he is also verbally bullied with a spectrum of nicknames, for example *new brat*, *new squirt*, *new scum*, and *fresh herring*. One way to understand the division between public school boys and secondary modern pupils is in the language used to describe non-public school pupils: *swine*, *tick*, *cad*, *oik*, *drip*, *squirt*, *scug*, and *goof*. These are extremely derogatory terms, it is not surprising animosity pre-exists, before official incidents give rise to conflict and tension. Eton has relatively few slang, most comes from Latin, for example *nant*=swimmer *furk*= illegal football kick (Time inc., 2010).

The Place of Grammar Schools

The grammar school (Tripartite system), can find its’ roots dating back to mediaeval times. Knowledge of Latin in government and the church was important, thus the grammar school system was introduced to study Latin grammar from dawn to dusk. During this era, the school system was independent from the church, unlike public education. As a result, during Henry VII’s Reformation, grammar schools remained intact (Wikipedia Foundation, Inc. 2008).

It wasn’t until the end of the 2nd World War that England and Wales established a national educational system with the introduction of The 1944

Butler Act. At this time, it was decided that three types of schools would be introduced, and one would be a grammar school for the intellectually able. However, this pre-requisite was abolished during the late 1960's. Nevertheless, some grammar schools remained but were identified as independent fee-paying schools, and non fee-paying schools managed by the LEA. As a consequence, we often see the word grammar in the name of a public school, for example Bristol Grammar School or Royal Grammar School, Guildford.

These schools practice a strict admittance process. Entry to the grammar school is similar to the university entrance system in Japan, but pupils are from the equivalent of Junior High School. The 11 + is taken at primary level, usually at 11 years. As I mentioned earlier, grammar schools which remain part of the LEA are few in England and Wales, however, those remaining continue to use the 11 + exam.

Catchment Area

Ubiquitous worldwide, most families and parents in the UK seriously consider the future of their children. A state education is adequate depending on the region, that is to say catchment area. Schools in rural or suburban areas can have a good reputation, due to faculty, teaching and facilities. However, in order to enroll in these schools it is a requirement to reside in the catchment area. As a result, many families move to be considered eligible. In recent years, lottery systems have been introduced, whereby children are selected regardless of residence.

Parent's Outrage

As you can imagine parents have expressed concern at such a non-means based lottery system. Perhaps more interestingly is the outrage expressed

connected to the house price. England and Wales is different to Japan regarding catchment areas. Entry into some primary schools is very competitive in Nagoya. If we consider state school, I believe that parents go to great lengths to be registered, regardless of true residency. This would be very difficult in the UK; since proof of residency is monitored ruthlessly. Which is fair? A random lottery system, or assurance for the wealthy that automatic enrollment can be assured.

Conclusion

Family values are consistently challenged in the UK. Britain has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe (Bates, 2008). Children raised in a single-parent family, often by the mother, are increasing. This social trend raises concerns about changes to family values. It is clear that with a cycle of young-mothers raising younger mothers, children are skipping childhood.

I wonder whether it is a result of failed discipline or a hole in the fabric of the young mother’s education. Nonetheless, being part of a community, one that adheres to strict mottos and morals can contribute to the foundation of a strong mind and spirit. There is no doubt public schools are beyond the means of low-income families, while in spite of bursaries, low-middle class families struggle to support children in public school. Perhaps more in-line with the realistic situation, the government needs to grant greater autonomy to state LEA’s.

Why should state schools have greater autonomy? In order to develop curriculums based on firm mottos that emphasis the development of a pupil’s values and morals. Perhaps the present half-hearted, predominantly protestant pastoral care, needs to have a greater influence in British schools. A school’s main priority is to educate children within a set of moral values, which empowers them to enter society with a strong sense of human

dignity. Should 7% of the population be responsible for maintaining good morals and values in Britain? Let us not forget the point introduced in the discussion, public schools are contributing 2 billion pounds to the maintenance of state schools.

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2010].

Appendix 1

Name:	State (comprehensive, secondary modern)	Public (private)
	Primary school (5–11)	Preparatory (prep) 4–5 ~13
	Secondary education (11–16/18)	Independent school 11–13~18
CONDITIONS	STATE	INDEPENDENT
1. Fee	None	19,000 pounds per annum boarding, 9,000 pounds per day. + Extra for posh uniforms, team game equipments + facilities.
2. Curriculum	Limited by National Curriculum	Broader views. More emphasis on traditional subjects: Math, Modern language + classics–ancient Greek + Roman literature + History.
3. Religion	No particular emphasis, but R. E is taught. No exam, but some daily worship (not compulsory).	Pastoral care is important—manners + morals learnt. Students need to attend school services regardless of personal religion.
4. Term length	Longer	Shorter.
5. Class length	Shorter	Longer: Sat A. M common and more H. W. More sports + circle time.
6. Sports	Available: rounders, hockey, football, netball, rugby, athletics, badminton cross-country, etc. During mid-term and some weekends.	Strong emphasis on team sports. More time + better facilities: cricket, fencing, swimming, lacrosse, etc.
7. Pupils	Melting pot 20: 1 Co-ed	More polite, well-mannered. Wealthier social classes. 9: 1 Single sex + co-ed day schools.
8. Teachers	Qualified Teacher Status/Registered with Teaching Council	Not necessary! (England + Wales—N. B Scotland requires). Life experience/higher education.
9. Discipline	Expulsion/State wide	School's own regime. Head-boy. Pupils need to respect school mottos.

Figure 1: Main differences between State and Public School Education⁷

⁷ Adapted from *Independent School (UK)* **Wikipedia Foundation, Inc.** 2010. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_school_\(UK\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_school_(UK))

School Name	Age	Boys, Girls or Co-ed?	Day or boarding school?	Type of School	School motto
1. Lockers Park	5–13	Boys	Both	Preparatory School	“Bene agree ac Laetari”
2. Haileybury	11–13 13–18	Co-ed	Both	Independent School	“Fear God Honor the King”
3. Haberdashers’ Aske’s School for Girls. /Haberdashers’ Aske’s Boys’ School	G: 4–18 B: 5–18	Girls Boys	Day	Independent School	“Serve and Obey” 1614
4. St Columba’s College	4–18	Boys	Day	HMC Independent School	“Courage, Courtesy, Compassion”
5. The Princess Helena College	11–18	Girls	Day + Boarding	Charity/Independent School	“Where every Girl is an Individual”
6. Merchant Taylors’ School	11–18	Boys	Day	Independent School	“Excellence, integrity and distinction since 1561”
7. St. Albans School	Boys: 11–18 Girls: 16–18	Boys + Girls	Day	HMC Day School	“Non Nobis Nati” 948

Figure 2: Independent Schools in Hertfordshire⁸

⁸ Adapted from *School Special*, Hertfordshire Life, September issue, 2008 www.hertfordshirelife.co.uk

Appendix 2

Public School Slang	Average Common Interpretation
<i>Beak</i>	Teacher
<i>Abroad</i>	Out of the sick room from Winchester College
<i>Bad Egg/Good Egg</i>	Nasty and cruel person//trustworthy and reliable person
<i>Major Harris</i>	Eldest son in Harris family
<i>Harris Minor</i>	Youngest son in Harris family
<i>Harris Maximus</i>	Eldest brother of 3 or more siblings
<i>Harris Minimus</i>	Youngest brother of 3 or more siblings
<i>Hogwash</i>	(Not Harry Potter terminology!) Tea, coffee or cocoa
<i>Flish</i>	From Christ's Hospital. Get the cane/get hit with a long thin stick
<i>Titching</i>	The same as above

Figure 3: Schoolboy Slang⁹

⁹ Adapted from *Public School Slang*, **KnowledgeRush** 2009 and *Education: Schoolboy Slang*, **Time inc.** 2010.